Some Waters Prime for Perch Comeback

By Greg Freeman

North Dakota's near-record winter and wet spring caused flooding across much of the state in 2009. But based on past experience, fisheries biologists and anglers only have to look back a decade to see what an extremely wet cycle can do for our state's fisheries.

Fisheries biologists refer to the mid-1990s when a few years of impressive summer rains were followed by the unforgettable harsh winter of 1996-97. Rain and snowmelt filled sloughs and meadows, creating many new yellow perch fisheries.

According to Scott Gangl, North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries management section leader, most of those waters were initially predator free, so young perch survival was excellent. In addition, fish growth was also good as newly-flooded shorelines produced an abundance of aquatic invertebrates.

As a result, anglers had remarkable perch fishing in central and eastern North Dakota in the late 1990s, continuing for about five years through 2004. In time, however, a decrease in lake productivity, coupled with an increase in the number of predators – northern pike, cormorants and anglers – caused a decline in quality perch fishing.

"It is said that on average a cormorant can eat 125 pounds of fish per summer, and some of those new perch lakes attracted more than 100 cormorants," Gangl said. "Also, word spreads quickly, and it wasn't uncommon to see hundreds of vehicles on a particular lake."

GREG GULLICKSON

Yellow perch, often ignored during open-water months in North Dakota, are highly pursued when state waters harden in winter.

However, the most important factor in the decline of the perch fisheries was a drought in the early 2000s, and many of those waters simply became too shallow for perch to survive. Today, with additional precipitation from 2009, many of these water bodies have filled again, and the potential for eventually reestablishing perch fisheries has improved.

Many perch lakes are likely temporary, with lake size and depth important in determining long-term success. The Game and Fish Department's philosophy is to try and establish perch lakes because most are too shallow to be walleye fisheries.

Perch fisheries can be very productive, but tend to be rare because they depend on Mother Nature providing an abundance of water. "And generally it is a short-term fix that doesn't last for several years because of the weather cycle in the Northern Plains," Gangl said.

If the water is around long enough, perch will do well by themselves, Gangl added. "At some point the food source might become scarce, so northern pike could be stocked eventually to thin out the population. If perch become overpopulated and pike aren't stocked, fish food becomes limited over time, causing their growth to slow."

This past winter central North Dakota received some of the heaviest snowfall, causing major flooding in the region once the snow melted. When flood waters subsided, a number of former perch fisheries were full of water again. Biologists looked at historical

A near-record winter and wet spring has many yellow perch fisheries around the state primed for a comeback.

CRAIG BIHRLE

records to help prioritize which lakes had potential. "As soon as the ice went off and flood waters receded, we set traps for adult perch with the idea of moving them to new waters," Gangl said. "With no other fish in these new waters, survival will be good and growth will be fast."

Biologists are able to trap adult perch and transplant them from one lake to another. "We move adults before they spawn," Gangl said. "This is especially effective with yellow perch. If they spawn after they are stocked, they enhance the population tremendously. It doesn't take a lot of adult fish to establish a fishery."

Fisheries personnel had trouble trapping fish this spring because there wasn't an abundance of adult yellow perch sources. "We were able to scratch together a good number in the central part of the state, allowing us to stock 39 lakes this spring with adult yellow perch," Gangl said. "Most were new lakes, and some were winterkilled lakes."

Gangl said not enough adult perch were collected to stock all of the designated lakes, so hatchery production fingerlings were used as well. "We took some of the 1 million perch we had requested from the hatchery and stocked 24 lakes with fingerlings," he said.

Seven of the lakes received both adults and fingerlings due to the lack of adults in some lakes. "These

seven were probably some of the better perch fisheries in the past on our list of priority lakes," Gangl said.

The fisheries that received adult and yellow perch fingerlings are found mostly in south central and southeastern North Dakota.

There are no guarantees on the prairie with all its inherent weather cycles. However, the Department hopes that in a few years these new perch fisheries will again dot the landscape. "These new lakes will take about three years before they are viable perch fisheries and another two before they could be considered jumbo perch fisheries," Gangl said. "It takes about five years to grow a 12-inch perch. Hopefully we can keep these lakes around that long, and the way the winter is starting we should be able too."

North Dakota is consistently going through wet and dry cycles, thus the number of lakes is going to fluctuate. Fisheries biologists currently manage around 300 lakes in North Dakota, compared to 170 lakes in the early 1990s.

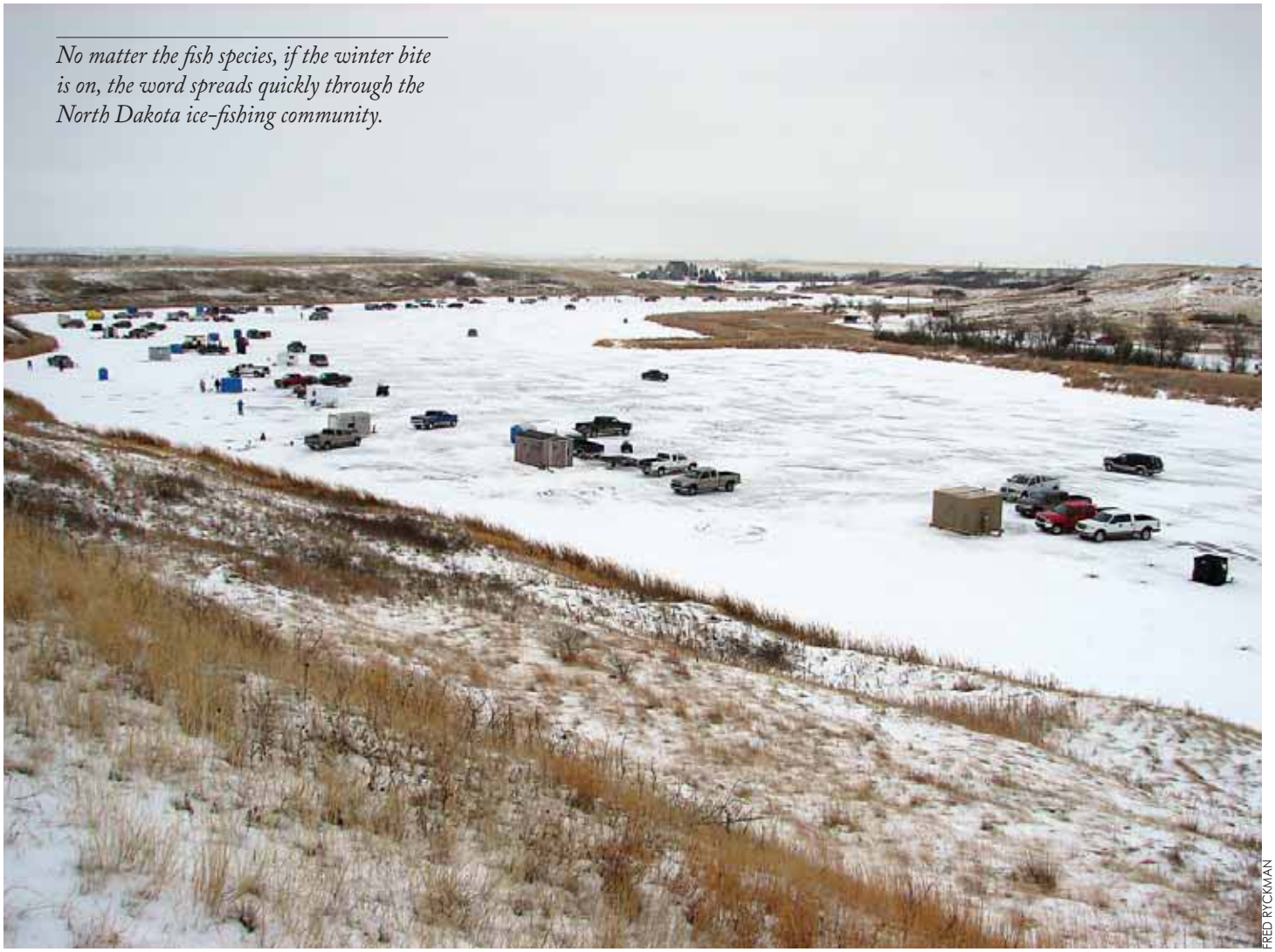
GREG FREEMAN *is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.*

Where the Perch Went

Even though Game and Fish Department personnel trap and transport adult fish to other waters, it is illegal for anglers to catch fish and transport them to another water body. More so, it is only legal to release fish back into the water immediately after they are caught. Once a fish is held in a livewell, bucket or by a stringer, they can no longer be legally released in any water.

To learn where adult yellow perch and fingerlings were stocked by Game and Fish in spring 2009, visit the fish stocking reports on the Department's website at gf.nd.gov. Remember, many of these fish were stocked as fingerlings, or are the result of spawning adults, so they won't be catchable-size for a few years.

No matter the fish species, if the winter bite is on, the word spreads quickly through the North Dakota ice-fishing community.



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